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Restoration plan aims to undo ocean pollution

About \$38 million collected in legal settlements from contamination at South Bay industrial sites could be used to assist wildlife. About 100 tons of DDT still rest on ocean floor off the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

By Lee Peterson
Daily Breeze

Anglers could land pesticide-free fish at local piers and varied flocks of seabirds would return to islands from Mexico to Ventura under a draft plan released Friday that aims to fix decades of environmental damage from ocean-dumped pesticide.

Funded with \$38 million from legal settlements paid by the dumpers, the plan for undoing a local ecological disaster lays out a diverse selection of wildlife to assist, by means of everything from building artificial reefs in the Harbor Area and South Bay to feral cat removal on distant islands.

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The plan's preferred option, however, doesn't include continued funding for a program to restore bald eagles to Catalina Island. Instead, it would watch to see if bald eagles can re-establish themselves on the northern Channel Islands without the elaborate steps necessary on Catalina.

Millions of pounds of DDT pesticide and the industrial chemical PCBs flowed into the ocean via the sewer system off White Point for at least 25 years until the release was discovered and stopped in the early 1970s.

About 100 tons of DDT and 10 tons of PCBs still rest on the ocean floor off the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

As a result, local fishermen have to worry about which fish to catch and how to cook them to lower the risk of eating toxic chemicals. Wildlife biologists go to great lengths on Catalina Island to sustain a reintroduced community of bald eagles, fostering chicks into nests where the eggs were not viable.

In 2000, the Montrose Chemical Corp. settled with the government for its role in the DDT spill and, in 2001, the trustees of the settlement fund -- three federal and three state environmental agencies -- created the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program to oversee the recovery of the wildlife injured by the dumping.

DDT use in general was widely blamed for almost wiping out birds like bald eagles and brown pelicans by the 1960s. The birds started to recover after the use of DDT was banned in the United States in 1972.

But birds in the Channel Islands had a tougher time. On Catalina, the eagles' eggs are still too weak to hatch on their own and, around various other islands, seabird colonies recovered from DDT but were wiped out by non-native predators like rats and feral cats.

Meanwhile, a fish that is banned locally for commercial fishing because it carries high levels of DDT -- the white croaker -- is still caught in large numbers from local piers and jetties.

The draft restoration plan, which is subject to public comment until May 23, figures to attract numerous comments and criticisms from the public.

The proposal to stop funding the \$200,000 per year Catalina eagle program figures to be controversial.

"It was definitely a tough decision for the council," said Jennifer Boyce, a trustee representative and restoration ecologist for the fisheries division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "I don't want to present it as the trustees are abandoning the eagle program. We are focusing on the northern Channel Islands and hope they have a bit more diverse (and less DDT-tainted) diet."

The Catalina Island Conservancy plans to weigh in on the issue in favor of continuing funding for the Catalina bald eagle program.

Some of the eagle eggs this year have shown signs of lower DDT levels, said conservancy President and CEO Ann Muscat.

"It could be that we are not that far away from having breeding pairs that could make it on their own, and we are concerned about stopping before we know more about it," Muscat said.

In addition, the loss of the breeding program could lead to the adults leaving the island and possibly opening up the endangered island fox to predation by interloping golden eagles, she noted.

The program, run by the Institute for Wildlife Studies, is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

"I think IWS has put too much effort into these birds to just let them disappear again, so we will do what we can to continue fostering chicks into the nests," said Peter Sharpe, lead wildlife biologist on the eagle project. "We've put too much into it to quit now."

Montrose Settlement Restoration Program bird biologist Annie Little said the thinking was that if the young eagles released on the northern Channel Islands in recent years can reproduce on their own, that would be a more logical way to sustain the raptor in the

island system.

"In the long run what we really want is restoration that is self-sustaining, so in 50 years you can look back at what the Montrose program funded and still see the results," Little said.

Of all the settlement money from various parties including Montrose Chemical Co., which owned the Harbor Gateway factory that produced the DDT, some \$30 million was set aside for the restoration program. With interest, it has grown to \$38 million.

When it came to fishing, the trustees decided to focus on giving anglers on the piers and other shore locations a bigger selection of fish to hook, by erecting artificial reefs that would provide habitat for species like rockfish. Rockfish are less prone to accumulating high levels of DDT and PCBs in their bodies.

For years, officials have sought to make it clear to the public that locally caught white croaker is not safe. Now they'd like to provide some alternatives.

"What they constantly ask for is, 'What can I do, what can I fish for, where can I fish?' " said Dave Whiting, fish biologist for the settlements restoration program.

Details of the reef plan, however, would have to be drawn up after the completion of a long-anticipated survey of contaminants in local fish due later this year.

Work to help seabirds would range far and wide.

Some of the islands in question have black rats, probably from past shipwrecks, that have ravaged seabird colonies on places like San Miguel Island. Feral cats have wiped out the ground-nesting western gull and Brandt's cormorant colonies on San Nicolas. Under the draft plan, the cats and rats would be eradicated, and devices would be set up to lure back the seabirds.

The program would also the monitor peregrine falcon, which was successfully reintroduced to the area, after it too was decimated by DDT.

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